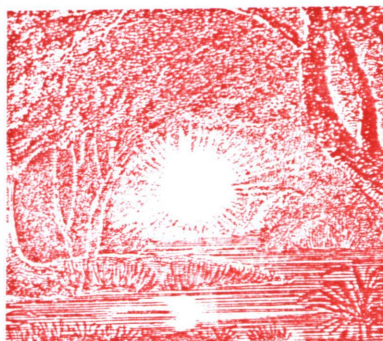


ball-of-light international data exchange

BOLIDE

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Dear subscriber,

It seems likely that 1990 will see a substantial advance in BOL research. Many of you will be participating in the Ball Lightning Conference at Budapest, which is sure to generate many relevant papers. At the same time, new developments in related fields - crop circles for one, UFOs for another - suggest that fresh input will be available to set beside what has already been collected - not only new data, but also new ideas.

So far as fresh data is concerned, the most important new material is without doubt that offered by **bolide** subscriber Greg Long, whose long-awaited report on 'the Yakima UFO microcosm' has at last been published (by the J Allen Hynek Center for UFO Studies, 2457 W. Peterson Avenue, Chivago IL60659). **Examining the Earthlight theory** chronicles a series of sightings of BOLs, over many years but within a limited geographical area, that is similar in many respects to the phenomena reported in two other notable cases : the Missouri observations of Harley Rutledge's **Project Identification**, and the Norwegian observations of Havik, Strand et al of **Project Hessdalen**.

Yakima is a native-American reservation in Washington State, in the NW USA. This is the area where Kenneth Arnold's notable 1947 sighting became the starting-point of modern UFO research. It is largely wilderness and forest, and as a precaution against fire look-out posts are permanently manned with observers - ideal conditions for observing anomalous natural phenomena.

And indeed, from these posts have come the majority of the 200 or so sightings of anomalous lights which have been reported in the area over the last 20 years.

And not only lights : the reports also include 'stories of disks and cylinders, strange fires and glowing canyons, inexplicable underground sounds, incidents of objects chasing automobiles and aircraft, radio system blackouts, encounters with humanoids and Bigfoot creatures, and a host of other strange occurrences'. (p3)

For the most part, however, witnesses have described 'very bright, white lights moving low in the sky and over rough, inaccessible terrain in the vast rangeland.' There are no human habitations or installations in the area, though there are a few roads. Because of the fire danger, no government agency would operate in the area without notifying the fire organisation.

Under these circumstances lights have been seen moving, or remaining stationary for considerable periods of time, then vanishing suddenly or moving slowly off. Though most reports describe only a more or less shapeless light, some indicate a structured object : thus one case in 1972 speaks of a two-story sized object. With the naked eye, the lookout saw a dark shape with a very bright, steady white light on the bottom end. Through binoculars, she saw a flashing red light on top and a steady red light on the lower portion. This was observed for 30 minutes before the observer gave up watching.

Some cases are very strange indeed. In 1978 a bright, twinkling light was seen, similar to a car's distant headlight but stationary. Through binoculars it could be seen as oblong or egg-shaped. In its centre, various colored lights having all the hues of the rainbow swelled and surged. The lights slowly pulsated like a beating heart for about 45 seconds, and then the object faded away.

Examining the sky, the observer saw a cloud which seemed to be illuminated from below : and looking below the cloud she saw a darker region which seemed to contain an illuminated row of square windows. This,, whatever it was, disappeared and the original light reappeared. After about 4-5 minutes, these vanished again, and a line of individual red lights flickered on from right to left, one after the other. Then other lights appeared...(p89)

The intensity of the light is often remarkable : one ranch owner witnessed, over several nights, a brilliant white ball of light of such intensity it was blinding. Sometimes it moved slowly across the terrain, sometimes it hovered. (p39)

Awareness of human activity has been noted on several occasions. Thus a couple in 1974 observed a red, a blue and a yellow light arranged in a triangle shape. The object appeared to remain over them. Reporting the incident, they said the behavior of the object made them think it wanted them to follow it (p29) - a familiar tale !

In 1976 an observer flashed a flashlight at an object : immediately, it enlarged, becoming fuzzy round the edges. It seemed to take a closer interest in them from that time on. (p36)

Interaction with machinery has been reported. Two men doing nighttime plowing saw an object. As it passed over them, the needle on the tractor's alternator ammeter swung to full charge, then returned to normal when the object had passed. (p33)

Animals have been affected : during a 1975 sighting on a ranch, the horses crowded up to the house and the dog retreated to his shed. (p35)

There are some indications of geomagnetic anomalies in the region, and some other aspects which appear to be compatible with the tectonic strain theory offered by Michael Persinger. However, as his title suggests, an important purpose of Long's book is to test existing theories about BOLs against the Yakima findings : and in particular, the theories of Persinger, and to some extent those of Devereux et al. By and large, Long concludes that the 'earthlight' theories are inadequate, as they stand, to provide more than a partial explanation.

In this verdict, I think most of us in the bolide network will concur. At the same time, it is evident that Persinger & co have done, and are doing, a very valuable job in opening up avenues of approach to the subject. To say that Persinger's theories, in their current formulation, are inadequate, is not in the slightest to belittle his work or to undervalue its significance for our research. If he has not yet come up with totally satisfactory answers, he is unquestionably asking many of the right questions ; and we shall watch the progress of his ideas with the greatest interest.

It is disappointing, therefore, that Persinger has yet to find a publisher for a major presentation of his ideas. Some years ago, asked to give a verdict on a manuscript of his for Blackwell's (a major academic publisher in the U.K.) I strongly urged them to do the book ; but unfortunately my urgings were insufficient !

What we do have, though, is **Earth Lights Revelation** (published by Blandford, London, 1989) : the principal author is Paul Devereux, with the assistance of David Clarke, Andy Roberts and Paul McCartney.

Seven years after its predecessor, **Earthlights**, this book is a more mature presentation of the 'earthlights' hypothesis, backed by substantial documentation by Devereux himself and his collaborators, notably from the Pennine Project of Clarke and Roberts. The result is an important gathering together of relevant data, together with comments encouraging us to judge that data in the context of 'the Earth's secret energy force'.

I suspect that I am not alone in finding this perspective less than convincing ; to speak of the failure to recognise the significance of his earthlights as 'cultural blindness' leading to 'intellectual tragedy' [p.13] strikes me as an overstatement of a kind that is liable to discourage serious acceptance of his ideas. It also prejudices his selection and presentation of material ; thus (eg p.139) Devereux speaks of alleged interaction with earthlights without giving any indication of being aware that such interaction has also been claimed with IFOs (see Hendry : Randles et al). Such shortcomings are regrettable, in that they suggest a reluctance to face objections to the hypothesis : more serious, though, is what seems to be an attempt to gather virtually the entire diversity of anomalous luminous phenomena into the same category of 'earthlights' of terrestrial origin : the Scandinavian 'ghost rockets' of 1946 are just one example of lights for which his hypothesis is inappropriate. This seems to me an extravagant projection of what is fundamentally a viable and valuable hypothesis.

What is most valuable in this book, to my way of thinking, is the data rather than the ideas : and we are promised an important second helping of data from the Clarke-Roberts team in a month or two's time, when Robert Hale are scheduled to publish their **Phantoms in the sky**. From two such hard-headed investigators we may confidently expect a factual, no-nonsense presentation of their findings in the Pennine area of Britain ; and we may further expect that these findings will help us to understand recurrent sightings in other locations. (For details, write to Andy Roberts at 84 Elland Road / Brighouse HD6 2QR / England : to order a copy, send cheque for £13 to include postage)

Compared with the fieldwork of Long, Devereux, Clarke & Roberts, the brief survey of the BOLs phenomenon in the collective compilations **Frontiers of reality** (edited by myself for Aquarian, Wellingborough), seems very much a desk-top scissors-and-paste job. However, I hope it has the effect of reminding us that BOLs are not a manifestation of our time, but often of many centuries : and also, that our efforts to understand them require us to confront not only the physical aspects of the phenomenon but also the human interface of the then-and-there circumstances of its manifestation in specific cases. I was once asked by Mrs Devereux what was the difference between 'my' BOLs and her husband's earthlights : I answered that whereas 'earthlights' implies a geophysical origin of some kind, I set no limits to what may be included within the term BOLs : until it can be shown that a particular BOL can be otherwise classified, we should at least entertain the possibility that it may be relevant to the BOL phenomenon as a whole.

This will be the theme, too, of my presentation at the Budapest conference, where I hope to persuade the gathered scientists - every one of whom will certainly be far better qualified than myself to address the subject ! - to take other forms of BOL into account when considering ball lightning in particular. If I am howled out of the conference hall in derision, you will gather that I have failed to make my point...

However, I take comfort from the fact that among the speakers will be Dr Terence Meaden, speaking of course about the implications of the crop circle phenomenon. (This is not the first time this year that he and I have appeared on the same platform : we both presented papers - he on his circles, I on my BOLs - to the European Rencontres at Lyon in April. And I can report that Meaden's French is a whole lot better than mine...)

Dr Meaden's book **The circles effect & its mysteries** is about to be re-published in a revised edition : write to him for details.

What the relevance of crop circles is to the BOL phenomenon remains a matter for conjecture : but that such relevance exists, there can be no doubt. Many bolide subscribers will therefore be interested to learn that - largely due to the efforts of bolide-subscriber Ralph Noyes - there is about to come into being a **Centre for Crop Circle Studies**, a multi-faceted body which seek to explore the phenomenon objectively but also comprehensively. Details from Ralph Noyes, whose address accompanies this dossier.

Finally, vol 15, no 148 of Meaden's **Journal of Meteorology** is devoted to 'Ball Lightning Studies' and comprises a number of papers, mostly case histories but also some theoretical approaches, all relevant to bolide research (indeed, three bolide subscribers are among the contributors). This, too, can be obtained from Dr Meaden.

The sum total of so much activity is extremely encouraging : clearly there is widespread acknowledgement that this is not only a viable but a promising field of research. But that is not all : for it is clear, too, that researchers are prepared, for the most part, to take the phenomena as they find them, rather than attempt to cram them into predetermined categories.

This is just as well, for there is a mounting body of evidence to the effect that the behavior of BOLs, no less than their physical characteristics, deserves our attention. Tempting as it may be to confine research to the 'hard' data, it is simply not realistic to set aside as irrelevant the 'soft' findings - the response of the witness, the social and cultural climate in which the phenomena manifest, and so on.

Certainly, the relevance of such factors is dubious, and may often be non-existent. But Long in Yakima, Rutledge in Missouri and Havik & Strand in Hessdalen all affirm, unequivocally, that interaction occurred between the phenomenon and the observer. We have either to show that this was a mistaken assumption in all three cases, or accept it as part of the enigma.

Please send anything that may help us to unravel the enigma - papers, clippings, original ideas or comments on other findings and ideas.

With all good wishes.

Helary

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